

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE BRIEFER: SECRETARY OF THE ARMY PETE GEREN SUBJECT: SOLDIER FAMILY ACTION PLAN MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 1:30 P.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, MARCH, 2008

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MR. HOLT: All right. I'd like to welcome you all to the Bloggers Roundtable. Thank you all for being with us today. And with us today, we have Secretary of the Army, Mr. Pete Geren.

Secretary, thank you very much for joining us.

SEC. GEREN: Thank you all for dialing in today. This is my first blog of my life. (Laughter.) I'm 56-year-old technological road kill, so new experience for me. But I appreciate very much the opportunity to visit with all of you.

I have now been secretary, acting secretary or secretary, about a year. It's been a very challenging year for the Army, but I feel like the Army has made great progress in many of the areas in fulfilling our Title X responsibilities. And two of the areas that I wanted to talk about today -- (electronic music plays).

Do we still have you?

MR. HOLT: Have we still got you there?

Q Mmm-hmm. (Affirmative response.)

SEC. GEREN: Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right, thanks.

SEC. GEREN: -- Army Medical Action Plan and our Family Action Plan. And over the course of the last year, we have initiated two major efforts in those two areas of concentration.

As you know, it was about a year when we had the problems at Walter Reed. And over the course of the last year, we have completely transformed the outpatient care for soldiers, not just at Walter Reed but across the entire Army. And we've established 35 Warrior Transition Units across the Army. We've added around 2,500 new personnel in support of our soldiers that are in the outpatient care. We've done away with the distinction between the active component and the Reserve component for soldiers that are in outpatient care.

And we have three people assigned to every soldier in Warrior Transition care. We have a nurse case manager, a squad leader and a primary-care physician. So every single soldier in our outpatient care has a triad of support to not only provide the medical care that he or she needs but provide services, educational services and career training to help them -- for those who are going to be leaving the service, help them prepare to leave the service, and those who want to stay in, help them to retain or gain new skills that will allow them to stay in. So it's a comprehensive overhaul of our approach to treating our soldiers that are in the medical care of our Army.

In the family area, we have -- building on several years of emphasis on the need to support families, have made a major investment in child care. As we've traveled around the country and met with families, the chief and the vice and the under and I, we have heard repeatedly about the stress on families and the importance of additional child-care facilities. Not only are we expanding the availability of child care, but we're reducing the cost and looking at ways to deliver it both on post and off-post.

As you probably know, so much of the family support over the years has been based on volunteers, where you have spouses that carry the heaviest burden for family support initiatives. One deployment, perhaps that works. Two deployments, that's starting to be too much to ask. And three deployments is pushing those volunteers to the breaking point. And in the budget that we have now, we are doubling the amount of money we're investing in family programs, but a big part of that investment is going to provide full-time support assistance for the Family Readiness Group operations. So those spouses who are juggling their own jobs and family responsibilities with children and also the needs of the Family Support Groups are now going to be supported with full-time personnel that can help them manage the Family Support programs.

We are also expanding opportunities for spousal education, as well as support to children, not just in the child-care arena, but providing educational support for families, particularly families that are having to make life work with a mom or a dad deployed overseas.

So let me stop now. I'll be glad to take your questions. Again I want to thank you for doing this and appreciate very much the contribution that all of you make to keeping our public informed about the important issues that are confronting us as a nation and as an Army. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Leah, you were first on line. Leah, with Spouse Buzz and Home Front Six, why don't you get us started?

Q Okay. First of all, Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for not only having me but also just for the Army Family Action Plan, both for families and medical. I actually met you in Hawaii about a year ago.

My question is with regard to the Family Covenant and the assistance that you guys are providing to the FRGs. Is this going to be a global policy? Is it more regional? And how exactly is -- (inaudible) -- to hire versus going through life solely on volunteers when it comes to the FRGs?

SEC. GEREN: It is a global policy. We're doubling the investment in family programs from last year, 700 million (dollars) to 1.4 billion (dollars) in 2009 budget. The plan is to hire the Family Readiness Group support all the way down to the battalion level. In the past they've only been at the brigade level, as you know.

Q Right.

SEC. GEREN: That'll be across the entire Army. And we are also hiring additional personnel in the child-care area, in the child and youth services areas. But in the Family Readiness Group specifically, we're providing the full-time support all the way down to the battalion level, and that's across the entire Army.

Q Wonderful.

MR. HOLT: Okay, FbL. Q I'd like to hear a little bit more about the Warrior Transition Units, if you could. My understanding is that they often get attached to the rear detachment groups. And so I'm wondering what kind of support there is for them when they are back with a rear detachment, which is a different mentality than what they came from as being wounded.

SEC. GEREN: Well, the Warrior Transition Units, we have 35 of them spread across the Army. And those have approximately 2,500 personnel -- new personnel have been assigned to Medical Command to support those Warrior Transition Units. And at this point I believe we're about 90 percent as far as filling those positions. We are using some borrowed personnel to get up to the 2,500. We're seeking to fill them permanently for those 2,500 positions.

But at every one of these -- and as I mentioned briefly in my opening remarks, the whole concept of the Warrior Transition Unit is to provide this triad of support that meets the full range of warrior- in-transition cares and needs.

You've got the squad leader, and the ratio there is one to 12. And that squad leader's job is to help those in his or her squad to heal. And that's the full-time job of that squad leader, and to work with those soldiers and make sure they get to their appointments; make sure that if they're starting to suffer some personal problems, some morale problems, to work with them as any leader in the Army would with somebody that's under his or her command.

You've got a nurse case manager, and the ratio of those is one to 18. Or, depending upon the complexity of the situation, it could be as high as one to 36. But that nurse case manager is assigned to that soldier from the point that soldier enters the WTU to the point that that soldiers moves on to the VA and leaves the system, or back into the regular Army.

And then the primary-care physician is a one-to-200 ratio, which is a ratio I don't think you'll find in any other health-care system. That's a position, and that position has 200 soldiers under his or her care. And those three are to work on the healthcare needs, the mental health-care needs and the professional development needs of each of those soldiers.

If a soldier is wounded, ill or injured, they're assigned to the WTU. They're not assigned to the rear detachment. These soldiers are assigned to the WTU, and that's their military assignment like any other military assignment someone would have if he or she were not injured.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Mike Goldfarb. Mike, you still with us?

Okay, Greg.

Q Hi, Secretary. My question is, in conversations with some of the captains in the Army -- and there's also press reports about this -- the problems they have with spouses at relocation and the opportunities for spouses, and just wondered if -- what do you, what is the Army doing, perhaps, to kind of address that issue, and provide a little more stability for some of these couples who have to face real limitations, as far as job opportunities for their spouses? SEC. GEREN: Well, at the present time there is no question that a spouse of a soldier has to suffer some limitations on what he or she can pursue as a professional career. And we recognize that that's an area that we've got to do a better job in. We have started the Spouse Employment Partnership, working with industry across the country, to provide greater spousal employment opportunities. The secretary of Defense and the secretary of Labor have entered into a joint venture between the two departments to expand spousal employment opportunities.

But the lifestyle of the soldier, and the many moves that a soldier makes -- no question, it takes a toll on that spouse's employment opportunities and professional opportunities. And it's an area that the chief and I are very focused on. And we know, as an Army, and we look to the future -- an all-volunteer force, we're going to have to do a better job of accommodating the professional ambitions and the economic needs of the spouses.

We have made -- we've made progress; we're trying to manage the force so that we have fewer moves; we're trying to provide educational opportunities so spouses can develop their professional skills and their employment possibilities; and also work in the, in the employer market and help identify more opportunities there.

With the economy that we have now -- and the part of media that you all are a part of, is there are opportunities today for spouses that wouldn't have existed a very few years ago. And as an Army, we need to explore how we can use this -- the internet economy, and use the virtual economy, to help spouses, whether they're blue collar, their employment skills are blue collar, or professional. I believe that the internet offers us opportunities to develop professional paths for spouses that we didn't have in the past.

So, General Casey and I both are committed to working in this area. We do have a long way to go, though, but I think the economy that we find ourselves in today, where so many jobs -- whether you're talking about low skill or the highest skilled, it doesn't matter whether you're in Killeen, Texas, or New York City, or Lake Tahoe, you can, you can develop professionally and have a fulfilling and rewarding career. So, that's an area where we have to do -- have more work to do.

I think it was particularly significant that the president acknowledged this challenge in the State of the Union, and recognized that this is an area that we, as the Department of Defense, have more work to do. But I do think, the way the economy has evolved, I think there are opportunities out there that, with the right type of effort and the participation with folks inside the Army and outside the Army, we can find opportunities there and help spouses to develop careers that would not have been available to them a very short time ago.

Q Are you looking at scholarships for spouses at all? Is that an option? SEC. GEREN: I'm not -- well, we are looking at -- in fact, one of the initiatives that the president announced, was to try to take the benefits of the Montgomery GI Bill that a soldier, sailor, airman or marine earns, and be able

to transfer those to a spouse. In the Army, we have a pilot program for -- I think we have about 30,000 soldiers that have participated in it so far, that would allow them to transfer their benefits to spouses.

It's a program that's just in its infancy. It was authorized, as a pilot, by the Congress a couple of years ago. And the president has asked the Congress and asked the Department to come up with a plan to expand the availability of the Montgomery GI Bill benefits to spouses and to children.

As far as other scholarship programs directly available to spouses, I'm not aware of them. But let me do some research on that and get back with you on it.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Mike Goldfarb, have you -- did you -- are you back with us?

Q Yeah, sorry about that. I'm just going to listen in, though.  
Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Thanks, Mike.

All right, well, any follow-up questions? Okay, anybody for follow-ups?

Q Yeah, it's Greg Grant again.

Mr. Secretary, I wonder if you could just -- it's somewhat more of a force structure question, if I could. The brigades you're adding, as part of the overall increase, from my understanding they're all going to be infantry brigades. Does that mean those are going to be Stryker brigades, or have you not made a decision on that yet?

SEC. GEREN: No, the plan right now is for six of them to be infantry brigades -- (audio break) -- have been -- the issue of whether or not there should be additional Stryker brigades is something that is under consideration. But for the six that we just announced and just cited, they're all going to be infantry --

Q So, the -- (inaudible) -- they resemble more the 10th Mountain type of infantry brigade. Is that -- ?

SEC. GEREN: Yes.

Q Okay. SEC. GEREN: Let me mention something, if I could. We -- okay, someone just informed me, regarding the scholarships, that many scholarships are available to spouses and children through the Defense Department's America Supports You program, which is a program that was started through the Department of Defense just a couple years ago. And they have rallied support of across the country -- with individuals, and companies and foundations that have provided extraordinary resources for our military families and servicemen and women.

I want to mention something, and this is -- we have not announced this but -- in the mental health area, and mental health has been an area of great emphasis from the very beginning of this conflict. The PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury, by some, have been called the signature wounds of this war. Certainly, the blast is the signature weapon of this war. And we have many soldiers coming home with invisible wounds.

And we started, last year, a chain-teach program to teach literally everybody in the Army -- active Guard and Reserve, all million soldiers, the basics of how it identify the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress; how to receive treatment, and the same for traumatic brain injury, with the goal not only of giving soldiers the basics of how to deal with those invisible wounds, but probably equally importantly is help break down the stigma associated with seeking help for those. Well, starting this summer, we're going to -- in June, we're going to start a chain-teach program for everybody in the Army on suicide prevention -- how to spot the personal, or the circumstances that might alert somebody to the threat or possibility of suicide, and how to gain treatment, or gain additional information to try to intercede and prevent somebody who might be considering suicide, prevent them from acting on their suicidal impulses.

That's something that we just decided to do last week -- I believe last Thursday, and it'll be a program that we'll launch next summer. And it's a follow-on to the PTSD/TBI chain-teach program. And, over the course of the last year we have taught nearly 900,000 out of the 1 million soldiers the chain-teach for PTSD/TBI, with the goal of teaching all million in this summer. We're going to do an add-on with the suicide chain-teach program, with the same type of outreach, where literally every soldier in the Army will have personal instruction in the, in the basics of the mental health issues associated with suicide prevention.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Any other follow-up questions?

Q Yes, this is FbL. I had one more follow-up question.

Mr. Secretary, you mentioned the plans to increase child care and child support for military families. What about -- what kinds of things are being done to reach out to the National Guard and Reserve, who might not be close to the bases and facilities where that would be offered?

SEC. GEREN: We're working across a number of fronts to meet the needs of the geographically dispersed soldiers and their families -- particularly a challenge with the Guard and Reserve.

General Wilson -- Lieutenant General Wilson is in charge of the program which we're trying to build the assets that we need and the communication system that we need to reach these geographically dispersed spouses and families. And we have got -- I'm trying to think of the name of the website where we're building a portal that will be like a virtual headquarters that anybody in the Army, Active Guard and Reserve can use and be available to geographically dispersed families and working with the Guard to provide services to families in partnership with the Guard across the country and partner between the Active and the Guard across the country so we can provide services at those remote areas. That program is called Military One Source.

We also have programs that'll help Reserve component families reduce the cost of child care and working on developing military childcare options in neighborhoods that are off post but programs that meet the quality of standards

of the military that are available in neighborhoods close to the Guard and Reserve -- soldiers and their families.

But it's a challenge -- the geographical dispersion poses a challenge but it's a challenge that we're taking on. And this -- over the course of the next couple of months we're going to be signing a community covenant with the families. Over the last year we did family covenants which the Army made a commitment to soldiers and their families -- and starting in April we're going to be signing community covenants. And that is going to thank the communities for what they've done to support families -- Active Guard and Reserve -- but also invite them to do more.

But that has led to what we have in place so far -- we've had very generous support from the private sector; the 4-H Clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs have partnered with the Army to help with the needs of our children.

But this community covenant that we're going to launch next -- I believe mid-April is when we're going to kick off the first one down at Fort Bragg -- we're going to do it in a couple hundred places across the country. And we expect through that effort that we're going to identify other partners that we can -- that can be very helpful to us in meeting the needs of families that are geographically dispersed and don't have a post that is available to them to take advantage of the services offered there.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. I know you're pressed for time here, so we appreciate you being with us. And do you have any closing comments or something you'd like to leave us with today, sir?

SEC. GEREN: I'd like to mention just a couple things in closing. But before Leah, the -- the spouse that's on the line -- and I hope that you've seen this in -- posted on insulations that you have visited or where you all live, but last year we also started a wounded soldier and family hotline which is a hotline that's available 24 hours a day and we get several hundred calls a month on it. But these are calls that come in and not only do we provide services in response to the calls but it's also a way for us to identify problems at early stages and not let them fester. The results of this hotline program are communicated with the leadership of the Army -- in fact we're briefed on the results every week. But we have an 800 number -- it's 1-800-984-8523 and answered 24 hours a day. And it's -- again, it's been very effective and we've been able to meet the needs of families and not only solve problems but families that are trying to identify resources, we work with them there as well.

These are challenging times for the Army. This is the longest war we ever fought with an all-volunteer force -- the third longest war in history, but the longest with an all-volunteer force.

This poses special challenges, in some cases unique challenges, for the Army. How do you sustain an Army of all volunteers where the soldiers are volunteers and the families are volunteers and get them to stay with us during these very challenging times? One deployment is hard and two is harder and three is harder. And we've got tens of thousands of families who have -- their loved one has experienced multiple deployments and that's asking a tremendous amount.

We have a lot to learn about what we need to do to meet the needs of the families. And under these circumstances we're committed to doing that though. And we're reaching out and working with families, getting input from them and trying to build a support organization that provides them a quality of life that's equal to the quality of their service.

But we've got a lot of work to do. I feel like we've made progress over the last few years but we're certainly not resting on our laurels. We recognize the challenges that are ahead and are going to continue to work in the health care area and the family support area and do everything we can to make sure that these soldiers who are carrying such a heavy burden for us and the families that are standing with them have the support that this nation wants them to have.

But I thank you for your time and I appreciate the service that all of you provide in helping to keep the public informed about what's going on in our military and with our Army and at this very critical time in our nation's history during this time of war.

Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Secretary of the Army, Mr. Pete Geren with us.

Mr. Secretary, thank you very much. And hopefully we can speak again, sir.

SEC. GEREN: I'd like to do that.

MR. HOLT: Thank you. SEC. GEREN: Thanks.

END.